

SOUTH FLORIDA WINTER WEEKEND

JANUARY 10 - 14, 2008

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Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

Winters in South Florida are famously mild. Some years, in fact, they're downright warm! But we do get the occasional cold front that can bring the temperature plummeting down to a more seasonal level. Just such a weather event was forecast for our South Florida Winter Weekend tour, and I was none too pleased. Luckily, the weather forecasters of South Florida are better with hurricanes than cold fronts and we were spared. We enjoyed fantastic warm and sunny weather. But the weather isn't the only reason to visit the Sunshine State in winter; it just happens to be a great time for birding.

On our first day we focused on a couple of recently opened water reclamation facilities that have become absolute havens for both birds and birders alike. At Wakodahatchee Wetlands we were treated to Purple Gallinules in various plumages chasing each other through the fire flag and spatterdock. These birds are often secretive and difficult to see, but at "Wako" we always have great success. We also saw what appeared to be a Purple Gallinule on steroids; it was a Purple Swamphen. This species has been introduced to South Florida and is increasing in numbers fairly rapidly. Tricolored Herons and Blue-winged Teal were practically at our feet as we strolled along the boardwalk, and an immature Roseate Spoonbill was a nice surprise as it perched at close range for several minutes. Great Blue Herons were on nests, and a pair of Anhingas at their nest put on a great show for us. After a little bit of work, we were finally rewarded with a great look at a Sora scurrying through the marsh right at our feet. In addition to the marsh birds, we hit a great mixed songbird flock that contained eight species of warblers! After our walk at Wakodahatchee we drove a short distance to another great "sewer pond," Green Cay Wetlands. Here we hit the jackpot for one of our main target birds, the Limpkin. It seemed like there was one every 20 feet, and we were told that people had been seeing a lot more of them than usual in response to an increase in their aquatic snail prey.

As we headed south toward Florida City that first day, we made a little detour in search of another key bird that likes to dine on gastropods, the Snail Kite. I was a little anxious after hearing several negative reports from birders searching for these guys, but I knew this was our only shot, and we'd just have to do our best. We were a bit delayed in our search by a huge flock of Wood Storks loafing right next to the road, but soon we were in the zone. It took only a few minutes of searching before we hit pay dirt: a Snail Kite foraging not more than 100 yards from us! We watched as it flew low over the saw grass searching for its prey, wings bowed in its characteristic style. We saw it make several "kills," and while it's not quite as dramatic as when other raptors catch a meal, it was still special seeing such a highly adapted animal making a living as only it can.

Our next two days were focused on the incomparable Everglades National Park. We sampled several of the different habitats of the park, spending time exploring hardwood hammocks, pinelands, saw grass prairies, fresh water sloughs, mangrove forests, and the extensive mud flats of Florida Bay. During our time in the park we saw a very cooperative American Bittern, several Great White Herons, Bald Eagle, tons of the distinctively pale South Florida race of Red-shouldered Hawk, Great Horned Owl on its nest, Pileated Woodpeckers, and the white-eyed race of Eastern Towhee. A huge American crocodile at the Flamingo Marina was great to see, and we took note of all the marks distinguishing it from the American alligators we'd seen elsewhere. The Everglades are unique and our time there was very fulfilling.

There are several productive birding areas just outside the park, and our time there paid off as well. We had several looks at Short-tailed Hawks, both light and dark morph birds. This species is a scarce breeder in Florida and is much easier to find in winter when they concentrate in the southern tip of the peninsula. White-crowned Pigeons mostly leave for the winter, but we were treated to several stunning views of perched birds, something a bit out of character for this normally secretive species. One of the trip highlights came when a very responsive Barred Owl landed on a wire right next to us in broad daylight and gave us mind-blowing views for several minutes before finally moving on. A flock of flycatchers one evening was a real bonus, as it was made up of 11 Scissor-tailed Flycatchers and a Western Kingbird! And what tour would be complete without a trip to the dump? Some mitigation wetlands near the Dade County dump were just full of birds, giving us great looks at American White Pelicans and American Avocets among others.

On our last morning of birding we tore ourselves away from Starbucks long enough to find an obliging pair of Red-whiskered Bulbuls. They gave us just enough time for everyone to get a scope view, then they departed, and soon after so did we. It was a highly successful relaxed and easy weekend of birding in some of the best weather to be found in North America in January.

ITINERARY:

January 10 - Tour orientation and dinner at nearby restaurant

January 11 - We started our trip with a brief search for anis near the Fort Lauderdale airport followed by visits to both Wakodahatchee and Green Cay Wetlands. After lunch we headed south then detoured out the Tamiami Trail for Snail Kite.

January 12 - Morning birding around rural Homestead and Florida City with visits to the Homestead Regional Airport, and Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area, A.K.A. Lucky Hammock and the Annex; the rest of our morning was spent working our way down the main park road in Everglades National Park with stops at the Coe Visitor Center, Pahayokey, Puarotis Pond, West Lake (picnic lunch) and finally Flamingo where we checked the flats of Florida Bay and Eco Pond before an afternoon return to the hotel.

January 13 - Morning birding at Flynn's then back into Everglades with stops at Long Pine Key, Hole-in-the-Donut, and Anhinga Trail. After a mid afternoon break we ventured out to birding spots in South Dade County checking Cutler Wetlands and Dump Marsh before heading back to Lucky Hammock at Dusk.

January 14 - It was back into the big city in search of those flashy exotics; we visited residential Kendall before checking A.D. Barnes Park on Bird Rd and then heading up to Fort Lauderdale for one more search for anis before drop offs at the airport.

BIRDLIST

Note: Species appearing in underlined print are birds of special note that are either rare, local specialties, or are otherwise generally hard to find. The taxonomic order and nomenclature follows American Ornithologist Union Check-list of North American Birds, 7th edition (including 47th suppl.).

Abbreviations:

FP: Frog Pond Wildlife Management Area, including Lucky Hammock and the Annex

ENP: Everglades National Park

WW: Wakodahatchee Wetlands

GC: Green Cay Wetlands

SD: South Dade, including Cutler Wetlands and Dump Marsh

WATERFOWL

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck - a flock of about 8 birds spotted in flight from the van as we approached WW

(Muscovy Duck) - This species is considered to be an established exotic in Florida, but does not count for your ABA list. These birds bear little resemblance to their wild ancestors

Mallard - this one actually did look wild; it was paddling around with some Ring-necked's in a mitigation pond along the Turnpike

Mottled Duck - we had great looks at GC and SD

Blue-winged Teal - great looks at WW and scattered other locations

Northern Shoveler - seen well in SD

Green-winged Teal - WW and SD

Ring-necked Duck - a nice close flock in a pond by the side of the Turnpike near WW

Lesser Scaup - a single male in SD

Hooded Merganser - a few females in ENP

Ruddy Duck - a couple of females in SD

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe - WW and ENP

PELICANS

American White Pelican - We saw several of these giants in SD and Flamingo

Brown Pelican - ENP

CORMORANTS

Double-crested Cormorant - seen daily

DARTERS

Anhinga - many fantastic looks, birds in high breeding colors and birds on nests; the pair interacting at WW were a highlight

BITTERNS & HERONS

American Bittern - we were lucky to get great looks at one at Anhinga Trail before it performed its famous disappearing act

Great Blue Heron - many close looks, including nesting birds at WW

(Great White Heron) - several on the flats at Flamingo, this used to be considered a separate species, but is now considered to be a subspecies of Great Blue Heron that only has a white morph

Great Egret - seen daily

Snowy Egret - fairly common and widespread

Little Blue Heron - several seen at scattered locations

Tricolored Heron - great close looks at WW and elsewhere

Cattle Egret - seen daily

Green Heron - many fantastic close views

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron - poking its head up from behind a rock wall at Flamingo

IBISES & SPOONBILLS

White Ibis - many seen daily, a common yard bird in S. Florida

Glossy Ibis - good looks at WW and ENP

Roseate Spoonbill - a great study of an immature bird at WW and gorgeous adults at Paurotis Pond

STORKS

Wood Stork - a huge flock on the Tamiami Trail and a spectacular look at ENP; we enjoyed observing their distinctive feeding behavior, using their feet to flush prey into their open, waiting bills

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Black Vulture - seen daily

Turkey Vulture - seen daily in direct comparison with the former species

HAWKS, EAGLES, & KITES

Osprey - we saw a few...hundred! quite common in South Florida

Snail Kite - great views both perched and in flight along the Tamiami Trail

Bald Eagle - over the flats at Flamingo

Northern Harrier - many good looks including an adult male

Cooper's Hawk - a distant perched bird and some flybys

Red-shouldered Hawk - the most common hawk in South Florida, the resident race is distinctively pale headed

Broad-winged Hawk - several looks at perched birds along the road

Short-tailed Hawk - most common over developed areas where I assume they are keying in on the abundance of Eurasian Collared-Doves, we saw both light and dark morph birds

Red-tailed Hawk - one perched along the Turnpike

FALCONS & CARACARAS

American Kestrel - seen daily

Peregrine Falcon - strafing the flats at Flamingo

RAILS & COOTS

Sora - we really had to work at WW, but we finally had great views

(Purple Swamphen) - like a gallinule on steroids, we had one at WW

Purple Gallinule - wonderful views at WW and GC

Common Moorhen - we saw the red bands around the tops of their legs at WW

American Coot - seen daily

LIMPKIN

Limpkin - they seemed to be in every clump of reeds at GC

CRANES

Sandhill Crane - a vocal pair in the field at FP

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover - on the flats at Flamingo

Killdeer - several scattered about

STILTS & AVOCETS

Black-necked Stilt - Eco Pond

American Avocet - a small flock in SD

SANDPIPERS

Spotted Sandpiper - on the rocks at Flamingo

Greater Yellowlegs - Eco Pond and SD

Willet - Flamingo flats

Lesser Yellowlegs - several in Eco Pond and SD

Marbled Godwit - many distant birds in Flamingo

Least Sandpiper - Hole-in-the-Donut

Stilt Sandpiper - a couple hiding in the dowitcher flock in SD

Short-billed Dowitcher - out on the flats at Flamingo

Long-billed Dowitcher - good numbers of calling birds in SD

GULLS, TERNS, & SKIMMERS

Laughing Gull - hundreds at Flamingo

Ring-billed Gull - seen most days

Lesser Black-backed Gull - an adult on the flats at Flamingo

Caspian Tern - good looks with the following at Flamingo
Royal Tern - the more slender carrot colored bill helped distinguish it from the former
Black Skimmer - oddly, just one at Flamingo

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon - seen daily

White-crowned Pigeon - we were lucky to see *one* perched, then we just kept seeing more!

Eurasian Collared-Dove - ubiquitous in South Florida, the origin of their U.S. invasion

White-winged Dove - only a couple around Florida City

Mourning Dove - seen daily, much daintier than the two former doves

Common Ground-Dove - little red-winged doves, we saw a few at Flynn's

PARROTS

Monk Parakeet - their huge bulky stick nests were quite impressive, we had excellent looks in Kendall

OWLS

Great-horned Owl - obligingly sitting on its nest in ENP

Burrowing Owl - sitting near its burrow at Homestead airport

Barred Owl - a *very* cooperative bird at FP was certainly a trip highlight!

NIGHTJARS & ALLIES

Lesser Nighthawk - about 15 at dusk over the field at FP

Whip-poor-will - two or three heard calling from Lucky Hammock at dusk

HUMMINGBIRDS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird - around flowering trees in Kendall

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher - seen daily

WOODPECKERS

Red-bellied Woodpecker - quite common in South Florida

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - a brief glimpse at West Lake

Northern Flicker - good looks at a few different individuals in ENP

Pileated Woodpecker - great looks in ENP

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Eastern Phoebe - seen daily

Great Crested Flycatcher - a few seen and heard, seen year round in South Florida

Brown-crested Flycatcher - heard only in ENP

Western Kingbird - this species regular in small numbers in South Florida in the winter time, we found one hanging with a flock of the following...

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher - often found with the former in small flocks in South Florida in winter, a group of 11 put on quite a show for us.

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike - quite common in South Florida, especially compared to the Northeast where they have almost disappeared

VIREOS

White-eyed Vireo - good looks at FP

Blue-headed Vireo - great looks at a few at FP

CROWS & JAYS

Blue Jay - seen daily

American Crow - only in ENP on this tour

Fish Crow - only outside of the Everglades system, these guys stay along the coasts

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow - we saw just a few here and there

WRENS

House Wren - we heard several, but they would never come out to play

BULBULS

Red-whiskered Bulbul - it took a little searching, but we were rewarded with fine views of a couple of these fancy countable exotics in Kendall

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet - Lee glimpsed one we heard calling at WW

GNATCATCHERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - common year-round in South Florida we saw many

THRUSHES

American Robin - not a big Robin year, but we ran into a couple large flocks

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Gray Catbird - numbers are way down this winter but we managed to see a few

Northern Mockingbird - seen daily

Brown Thrasher - one seen by most at FP

MYNAS & STARLINGS

European Starling - seen daily

(Common Myna) - probably the next countable exotic for Florida, they are getting more common each year; we saw them in Florida City

WOOD WARBLERS - 16 Species!!!

Orange-crowned Warbler - one at WW was a real stinker, but seen by a couple of us

Northern Parula - WW and Kendall

Yellow Warbler - a single bird at Shark Valley ENP was a good find

Magnolia Warbler - uncommon in winter in South Florida, we found one at FP

Cape May Warbler - also uncommon in winter, we found 3 drab female plumage birds

Black-throated Blue Warbler - a snazzy male showed well at FP

Yellow-rumped Warbler - quite common this year, seen daily

Black-throated Green Warbler - our last new warbler in Kendall

Yellow-throated Warbler - good looks at several

Pine Warbler - several seen well at WW and in ENP; one seen well at FP was new for this heavily birded location

Prairie Warbler - common year round in FL we found a few at WW and FP

Palm Warbler - “Western Palm Warbler” is the form that winters in South Florida, and they sure are common, many seen daily

Black-and-white Warbler - good looks at FP and WW

American Redstart - a couple in ENP

Ovenbird - heard only at FP

Common Yellowthroat - seen almost daily

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Eastern Towhee - we had good looks at a singing bird of the “white-eyed” race of the southeastern US at Long Pine Key in ENP

CARDINALS & ALLIES

Northern Cardinal - seen daily

Indigo Bunting - one seen by Pam at FP

Painted Bunting - one at GC and another at FP, both females

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird - seen daily

Eastern Meadowlark - great looks at singing birds at the Homestead Airport

Common Grackle - seen daily

Boat-tailed Grackle - seen daily

FINCHES

American Goldfinch - not a big finch year, but we found a few at WW and FP

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow

BUTTERFLIES

Great Southern White (*Ascia monuste*)

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*)

Julia Heliconian (*Dryas julia*)
Zebra Heliconian (*Heliconius charitonia*)
White Peacock (*Anartia jatrophae*)
Ruddy Daggerwing (*Marpesia petreus*)
Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)

OTHER CRITTERS

REPTILES

American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) an endangered species, we were lucky to see one in the Flamingo Marina

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) we saw some big'uns

Florida Cooter (*Pseudemys floridana*)

Florida Redbelly Turtle (*Pseudemys nelsoni*)

Florida Softshell (*Apalone ferox*)

Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) fairly common in South Florida, an exotic

MAMMALS

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Scuirus carolinensis*)